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Ex-Businessman Plays A Spy for Hitchcock

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P-Uris, Leon

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HOLLYWOOD—It's no longer top news in Hollywood when stars of the stripe of Cary Grant, Bing Crosby, James Stewart and Fred MacMurray make million-dollar business deals in real estate, gas wells and corporate transactions.

But it's a switch when a successful businessman becomes a movie star—one who's handsome and a born heart-flutterer, at that!

Four years ago, tall, suave Frederick Stafford was a kingpin in the pharmaceutical industry in Europe, had never seen the inside of a motion-picture studio, and "would have cut my throat if anybody had told me I was going to end up as a movie actor. I was completely oriented to the business world, and I did a lot of daring, unorthodox things that turned out successfully in my line."

Today he's starring as the French intelligence agent in Alfred Hitchcock's "Topaz," and there hasn't been so much excitement among stenographers, waitresses and messenger girls on the Universal lot since Cary Grant first drove through the gates.

He's Still Dazed

And although he has already starred in seven European pictures, and is rated the hottest new face on the Continent, he's still dazed about ending up in Hitchcock's suspense drama, based on Leon Uris' novel, and signing a contract with Universal.

"It's unbelievable," says Stafford, whose English is overlaid with a faint European accent. "Becoming an actor in the first place! I didn't know the front of the camera from the back. My first picture was 'Mission for a Killer,' in which I played a secret agent known as '117.' I thought Andre Hunebelle (the director) was out of his mind for trying to talk me into trying my hand as an actor, and even cra-

zier for not firing me after the first day.

"But the picture turned out to be a great commercial success and nobody complained about my performance. There was a second film opposite Jean Seberg — another 'Agent 117' — and then four other films. Suddenly I began to realize that I was in demand, that my agents were turning down many offers — and that I wouldn't be going back to my desk as a business executive."

He Read The Book

How did Alfred Hitchcock, who prefers big names, come to sign him for "Topaz"?

"I read the Uris book when it was published in Europe and I liked it enormously. A thought that it would be wonderful to play Andre Devereaux never even crossed my mind. A few months later my agent said Hitchcock wanted to talk to me about the part.

"I was in Rome completing 'The Battle of El Alamein' when Mr. Hitchcock telephoned from Paris. I managed to stammer that I couldn't meet him there because I was in every scene of the Picture I was doing. So he came to Rome to see me.

"I had worked on a night scene until 6:30 in the morning on the day I did an interview-test for him. I thought I was giving the wrong answers, but when it was all over, he said, 'Congratulations,' and told me he had seen all of my pictures."

Stafford, who fled his native Czechoslovakia as a student and found refuge in Australia, is convinced that he still would be regional manager of Bristol-Myers, with headquarters in Hong Kong and the entire orient as his territory, but for a blonde beauty who was vacationing in Bangkok. He wangled an introduction and married Marianne Hold eight days later.